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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this descriptive study was to identify factors related to dropout/retention for distance education students in order to identify variables that might promote participation through completion. The major focus of the study was to document the distance education students' learning progress and to identify variables that relate to their decisions for dropping out or staying in the program. The participants in the study were undergraduate students, who originally enrolled in the distance education undergraduate program at the National Open University of Taiwan. The instrument used in this research was a mailed questionnaire for investigating the factors of dropout or retention for distance education students. The key factors that related to dropout or retention decisions for undergraduate distance education students for this study are: demographic variables, goal commitment, social integration, and academic integration. (Contains 30 references.) (Author)

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this descriptive study was to identify factors related to dropout/retention for distance education students in order to identify variables which might promote participation through completion. The major focus of the study was to document the distance education students' learning progress and to identify variables that relate to their decisions for dropping out or staying in the program. The participants in the study were undergraduate students who originally enrolled in the distance education undergraduate program at the National Open University of Taiwan. The instrument used in this research was a mailed questionnaire for investigating the factors of dropout or retention for distance education students. The key factors which related to dropout or retention decisions for undergraduate distance education students found for this study are as follows. (1) demographic variables, (2) goal commitment, (3) social integration, and (4) academic integration.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, the number of programs and schools offering distance education as a cost-effective and as an educationally-efficient learning system in higher education has increased rapidly in many developed and developing economies. The need to keep up with technological advances, job training or retraining, and below par literacy skills are among the many reasons that adults need more education and return to school. Mature adults need an educational system that has the flexibility and diversity to provide advanced education for everyone (Huang, 1997). Fortunately, distance education is the most obvious and efficient solution. Distance education reaches across geographic boundaries and provides opportunities for higher education and technician level training to those unable pursue traditional programs (Sherritt, 1996). It provides flexible access for the traditional student and an educational "second chance" for adults who were previously denied opportunities (Rumble, 1986; Van Enckevort, 1986; Garland, 1992).

However, many of the recent distance education studies do not adequately address the learning experience of distance education students in a higher education while they have focused on student outcomes, such as academic achievement and intention to enroll in other distance education courses. Glatter and Wedell (1971) state that the dropout rate in distance education classes is much higher than would be expected in full-time courses and could reach 70 percent. According to Kember (1995), Rumble (1982), Wichit Srisa-An (1984), and Fleming (1982), the dropout rates in some distance education schools are higher than expected. In the distance education university in Venezuela, the dropout rate was 79%; at the Open University of Thailand, 62% of the students were no longer enrolled after two years; in Pakistan's distance teaching university, the dropout rate was 99.5%

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as early as the first semester. These examples show that distance education institutions generally lose half or more of their enrolling students.

This lack of retention is also the situation at the National Open University (NOU) of Taiwan. It is recorded that only about 5% of the students who completed the registering process at the NOU obtained a degree. Therefore, this study aims to identify the significant characteristics of distance education students who have dropped-out or continuously and successfully progressed in the distance education program at the NOU of Taiwan. The major focus of this study was to identify the factors which might relate to the students' decisions for dropping out or staying in the distance education program, and to gain a better understanding of students' perceptions of their current academic setting.

Statement of the Problem

The problems can be summarized into three central questions. First, who is the distance education student? How do students' characteristics relate to their decisions of dropout or retention? Second, what are students' reasons for dropout or retention in the program? How do the variables in terms of *external attribution, emotional encouragement, and motivation* relate to the students' decisions of dropout or retention? Third, what are the students' perceptions of their academic setting in terms of interaction with the instructors/institution and the impression of their current program? How do these perceptions relate to their decisions of dropout or retention?

Literature Review

Studies (Drummond, 1989; MacKinnon-Slaney, 1994; Sheath, 1965; Tinto, 1975; Bean & Metzner, 1985, 1987; Kember, et al., 1992 & 1994) have indicated that the factors of support and encouragement (such as family support and encouragement), external attribution (such as insufficient time, financial difficulties), and motivation (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983; Wlodkowski, 1985a & 1985b; Knowles, 1984; Maslow, 1970; Kember, et al., 1992 & 1994) were related to the student's learning experience.

Many of the factors of dropout and retention research in distance education include demographic characteristics of the individual learner over which the educational institution has little or no control. However, for the institution, it is significant to consider these individual characteristics. Several studies (Fjortoft, 1996) identify the reasons which lie behind student dropout as an important task in order to provide trends to an institution. In fact, student dropout is usually costly to the institution and the individual (Metzner & Bean, 1987). Furthermore, a high dropout rate also suggests a failure to solve a larger social issue, the equality of educational provision (Belawati, 1998).

An interactive process between the individual and the institution may also relate to students' dropout rate in higher education (Tinto, 1973; Bean, 1985; Metzner & Bean, 1987). Cable television is currently being used as the delivery media at the NOU. Researchers Ritchie and Newby (1989) found that in a television classroom environment, students experienced less involvement, less ability to ask questions, and less overall enjoyment in the learning experience than did students in a traditional classroom setting.

Methodology

Research Design

A descriptive survey method was used to collect data. The study used a mailed questionnaire to gather data from distance education students at the NOU of Taiwan related to their enrollment decisions of dropout or retention. The questionnaire was designed to answer the research questions and consisted of closed-ended questions.

Subject Selection

From the target/accessible population (N = 10,133) who first entered as full-time freshman four years ago at all of the distance education centers in mainland Taiwan , a proportional stratified random sample of the NOU distance education students from eleven distance learning centers was selected to arrive a representative sample size at a total sample (n) of 375, as recommend by Krejcie and Morgan (1970).

Return Rate

The overall response rate for this study was 81.07% after 3 follow-up mailings followed by the initial mailing.

Findings

Research Question #1

The responses to the first research question, "How do the selected demographic characteristics relate to students' decisions of dropout or retention?" were analyzed using the point-biserial correlation coefficient or phi coefficient (ø)/Cramer's V statistic based upon the type of variables to be correlated.

The results of the point-biserial correlation coefficient indicated that there were statistically significant relationships with the enrollment status for the categories of number of semesters, grade performance, age, and salary. The results of phi coefficient (ø)/Cramer's V statistic indicated that there were significant relationships with enrollment status based on gender, sponsorship, occupation, and education.

Research Question #2

The responses to the second research question, "How do the factors of External Attribution (Insufficient Time, Events Hinder Study, Distractions, and Potential Dropout) relate to the students' decisions of dropout or retention?" were analyzed using the point-biserial correlation coefficient. The results indicated that a significant relationship existed between the enrollment status and *External Attribution* (r= -.257, p= .000), which included subscales of *Events Hinder Study* (r=-.346, p=.000), *Potential Dropout* (-.215, p=.000), and *Insufficient Time* (-.140, p=.000) at the .01 level. The external attribution means negative social integration and is sub-divided into four subscales in the instrument.

Research Question #3

The responses to the third research question, "How do the factors of Emotional Encouragement (Enrollment Encouragement, Study Encouragement, and Family Support) relate to the students' decisions of dropout or retention decisions?" were analyzed using the point-biserial correlation coefficient. The results of the point-biserial correlation coefficient indicated that no significant relationship existed between the factors of Emotional Encouragement (Enrollment Encouragement, Study Encouragement, and Family Support) and the students' decisions of dropout or retention.

Research Question #4

The responses to the fourth research question, "How do extrinsic and intrinsic motivation factors relate to students' dropout or retention decisions?" were analyzed using the point-biserial correlation coefficient. The results of the point-biserial correlation coefficient indicated that no significant relationships existed between extrinsic motivation and students' enrollment status as dropout or retention decisions. However, there was a significant relationship between students' enrollment status and intrinsic motivation ($r=.186$, $p=.001$) at the .01 level. It indicated that as participants had more intrinsic motivation, they were more likely to stay enrolled or complete the program compared to those with less intrinsic motivation. However, it was only a low relationship between intrinsic motivation and enrollment decisions of dropout or retention.

Research Question #5

The responses to the fifth research question, "What are the students' perceptions of their interaction with the instructor/institution and their perceptions of their current program? How do these perceptions relate to their dropout or retention decisions?" were analyzed using the point-biserial correlation coefficient. The results of the point-biserial correlation coefficient indicated there was a significant correlation with enrollment status based on Negative Impression of the Program ($r= -.183$, $p= .000$) and Positive Interaction($r= .207$, $p=.000$) at the .01 level. The results indicated that participants who expressed more dissatisfaction with the program and its support tended to dropout from the program more frequently than those who expressed less dissatisfaction with the program. In addition, the results also indicated that the participants who gave more positive feedback tended to stay enrolled or complete the program more frequently than those who did not give positive feedback. The positive feedback referred to course materials, tutoring, assignment marking and administration.

Conclusions, and Recommendations

Conclusions

Based on the results of the present study, the researcher identified the key factors related to dropout or retention decisions for undergraduate distance education students:

1. Demographic Variables: age, number of semesters, grade performance, salary, gender, occupation, education, sponsorship.
2. Goal Commitment: intrinsic motivation
3. Social Integration: insufficient time, events hinder study, potential dropout
4. Academic Integration/incompatibility: positive interaction with instructors/institution, negative impression of the program

Theses four factors are related to dropout or retention decisions for the undergraduate distance education students. Among these factors, the students' grades and academic integration are more under the control and can be managed to some extent by an institution.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher makes the following recommendations that might be taken by the institution to improve the distance learning environment. Finally, recommendations for future research in the area of distance education are addressed.

Recommendations for institutions:

1. The institution should offer flexibility within units and wide choice of units to form a course in order to maximize intrinsic motivation students.
2. As suggested by Landtroop (1998), students' grades can be influenced by each professor's teaching/learning philosophy and the instructor/student interaction. Therefore, the institution should create some constructive ways to involve the students in learning and encourage instructors to interact with the students.
3. Every distance learning center should have enough staffs to assist students. The employment of counselors is also recommended. Counselors should be able to assist students in integrating study demands with work, family, and social obligations.

Recommendations for future research:

1. Conduct qualitative studies to confirm and clarify findings.
    a. Interview individuals from the various distance learning centers.
    b. Interview students who have decided to no longer enroll in the program in order to glean information about possible factors associated with student dropout.
    c. Interview students who have completed the program or stay enrolled in order to obtain information about possible factors associated with student retention.
    d. Interview faculty who have experience with teaching and interacting with distance education students.
2. Investigate the current policies and practice of the National Open University that impact student's learning.
3. Research must continually explore the relationship and factors associated with dropout or retention. Establishing a longitudinal study and monitoring students' learning progress over time is suggested. The factors related to stop-out should also be studied. What were the factors leading to their dropout? What intervention could be provided?
4. The timing of dropout requires more investigation in distance education. For example, factors contributing to early dropout (dropout soon after enrolling) versus later dropout should be explored. What were the factors leading to dropout?

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